

Testimony By Ms. Mary Wilson

National President

League of Women Voters

Mr. Chairman, members of the committee, I am Mary G. Wilson, president of the League of Women Voters of the United States. I have also served as president of the League of Women Voters of New Mexico, and am a long-time resident of that state.

I am pleased to be here today to express the League's support for full voting participation by all eligible American citizens and our opposition to efforts to create new barriers that block citizen voter participation.

The League of Women Voters of the United States is a nonpartisan citizen organization with more than 150,000 members and supporters in all 50 states, the District of Columbia and the Virgin Islands. For more than 86 years,

Leagues across the country have worked to educate the electorate, register voters and make government at all levels more accessible and responsive to citizens.

Mr. Chairman, some have suggested that illegal voting by non-citizens is a significant problem in federal elections. We in the League of Women Voters do not share that view. It is always difficult to prove a negative, and we certainly can not prove that non-citizens never attempt to vote. But, Mr. Chairman, many members of the League of Women Voters have served for years as poll workers and voter registrars and we have not seen credible evidence that non-citizens are attempting to register to vote or are voting. There is no evidence that it is occurring in significant numbers. Indeed, since it is illegal in every state for a non-citizen to vote in a federal election, we would expect to see many reports of prosecutions and convictions if significant numbers of non-citizens were, in fact, voting.

Since the 2000 presidential election, a great deal of attention has focused on our Nation's systems of election administration. Many Americans are deeply concerned that their votes may not be properly counted and that eligible citizens may be blocked from registering to vote and from voting. From voting machines to voter registration, from voter roll purging practices to provisional balloting, Americans are worried about the conduct of elections. The League of Women Voters also has concerns about our election systems.

But, in addressing the problems that do exist in election administration, we believe it is vitally important that officials who are responsible for establishing and administering those election systems act only after careful consideration of the facts, rather than acting on the basis of people's fears. From our perspective, any proposal that restricts voter registration or raises barriers to voting in order to deal with the supposed problem of non-citizen voting is a fear-based approach instead of a fact-based solution. We simply have not seen the facts that would justify restricting the franchise.

Your committee, the Committee on House Administration, was the source of the Help America Vote Act (HAVA), which was adopted in 2002 to deal with the many problems exposed in the 2000 election. HAVA is being implemented across the country, and many changes are being made in our election systems. We would urge caution before the Committee or the Congress embarks on further major changes. There is much in HAVA that will take time to fully and effectively implement, and we urge the Committee to focus on that implementation process.

The League of Women Voters strongly opposes H.R. 4844. This bill, referred to as the "Federal Election Integrity Act of 2006," does nothing to protect the integrity of the election process or assure all citizens the right to vote. Instead it creates new barriers by requiring eligible voters to show photo identification at the polling place and to present documentary proof of citizenship in the voter registration process. In essence it chills the rights of voters by placing one more hurdle in their way to the ballot box. Instead of dampening the

enthusiasm of voters, we need to do every thing possible to encourage and assist voters in exercising this right that we as Americans too easily take for granted.

As an organization that conducts voter registration throughout the country and that encourages voter participation by all citizens, the League is deeply concerned that H.R. 4844 would undermine our own activities as well as those of others who seek to boost citizen participation in our nation's democracy.

Voting is the most fundamental expression of citizenship. The expansion of the franchise to include all Americans regardless of race, ethnicity or sex is one of the great successes in the evolution of American democracy. Breaking down barriers to citizen voter participation - from literacy tests to the poll tax - has been a constant battle for those of us who believe that every citizen should be able to exercise their right to vote.

We believe that H.R. 4844 would turn back the clock and erect unnecessary barriers to voter participation. Many Americans simply do not have the documentary proof of citizenship and photo ID that would allow them to exercise their right to vote if H.R. 4844 were to become law.

A recent study by the Secretary of State of Georgia reports that nearly 700,000 of Georgia's registered voters do not have either a driver's license or a state-issued ID. This is consistent with national figures from the Department of Transportation estimating that 6-12 percent of voters nationally do not have government-issued photo ID.

In our modern society, where many of us travel by air or bank with credit cards, it is easy to assume that everyone has appropriate ID or can prove their citizenship. But it is a more difficult problem than one might think. For example, older women are substantially less likely to have ID than others, and getting that ID in order to vote could be a major burden. People who were born outside of hospitals are among those who can face problems in getting birth certificates or other proof of citizenship.

This raises the issue of what is adequate proof of citizenship. As I understand it, only a passport, certified birth certificate, or official naturalization document can really prove one's citizenship. These can be difficult and costly items to obtain, and many citizens do not now have them. In fact, it is native-born citizens who are most likely to have difficulty proving their citizenship.

We understand that there is popular support for ID and proof of citizenship requirements, as shown by the adoption of a recent initiative here in Arizona. But we believe this reflects a popular misunderstanding about the difficulties in getting proper ID for even "average" citizens, the likely discriminatory effects of such requirements, and the difficulties in administering an ID system.

The costs of obtaining proof of citizenship and photo ID would clearly discourage voter participation. Some have appropriately likened such requirements to the poll tax because of the costs of obtaining a driver's license or passport. Supporting documents for ID, such as a birth certificate, can also impose real costs in both time and money.

For a citizen of voting age, the passport application fee is \$55. The security surcharge is \$12. The execution fee is \$30. The total is \$97. For native-born Americans, a certified birth certificate is required, with its accompanying costs.

Under at least one proposal, every voter would be required to prove their citizenship before voting in 2008 - more than 100 million Americans would need to prove their citizenship.

Photo ID requirements disproportionately affect the elderly, young people, racial and ethnic minorities, persons with disabilities and others. A number of studies have shown that certain segments of the population are far less likely to have ID than other Americans. For example, a recent survey at the University of Wisconsin has interesting information that the Committee should consider before it moves ahead in this area.

The implementation of ID requirements can also cause problems for eligible voters. In Indiana, veterans recently were blocked from voting when poll workers refused to accept their Veterans Administration medical cards as sufficient ID. But the question of what ID is acceptable is just one of the problems. The process of determining whether a person actually matches their photo ID can be very subjective and open to discrimination as well.

Poll

workers already face very significant burdens, and most poll workers receive remarkably little training. Yet the success of our elections depends on careful administration of many different requirements by poll workers.

Many of

the proposals for photo ID and proof of citizenship requirements fail to take into account existing protections already enacted to protect against non-citizen voting. Most of these protections, if not all of them, originated in this committee.

Every

person who registers to vote is required by federal law, the National Voter Registration Act, to attest, under penalty of perjury, that they are a citizen of the United States and that they meet the eligibility requirements to register to vote. Penalties are provided for persons who violate this statute. In addition, every voter registration form must have the citizenship requirement clearly and prominently displayed.

Under the

Help America Vote Act, states are required to match voter registration information from all applicants with driver's license information, Social Security Administration data, and information about criminal convictions. One of the purposes of this matching is to ensure that non-citizens, as well as other persons who are not eligible to vote, do not end up on the voter registration rolls. In addition, first-time voters who register by mail are required to provide copies of their identification in the voter registration process.

In

summary, Mr. Chairman, the League of Women Voters does not support legislation to require photo identification at the polling place or documentary proof of

citizenship in the voter registration process. We believe such requirements create new and unnecessary barriers that block citizen voter participation. We support full voting participation by all eligible American citizens and hope that the Committee and the Congress will join us in seeking ways to improve voter participation rather than restrict it.

Thank you for the opportunity to share our views.